Conclusion

The developments in the multilateral and other regional trading systems have had an impact on ASEAN efforts on economic liberalisation. These ASEAN liberalisation efforts are a harbinger of more significant positive changes. The push for AFTA 2000, and the start of ASEAN negotiations on market access in service trade will make the region even more competitive.

But even as we strengthen our intra-ASEAN economic framework, ASEAN will always remain an outward oriented regional grouping. By improving ASEAN's competitiveness, we will be able to increase and deepen its economic integration with the rest of the world.

For the same reason, ASEAN has been actively engaging other countries like the US and Japan in regular dialogue sessions. ASEAN is also establishing linkages with the Australia New Zealand CER. These ties extend the concept of open regionalism, thereby acting as building blocks for the multilateral trading system. The impact of WTO on ASEAN has therefore come a full circle.

ASEAN has done well. Our seven per cent annual economic growth rate in recent years far exceeded the world's average of 1.6 per cent. But we cannot be complacent and take for granted that all will remain well. With increasing competition, and other regions moving quickly to lower their internal trade barriers, it is vital that we do not end up falling behind. ASEAN needs to seize the opportunity to move forward boldly in the economic arena. In doing so, ASEAN would also help pull the global trade train forward.

With that, let me close by wishing you an interesting and fruitful meeting.

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**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN,
MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS,
AT THE OPENING OF THE WORKSHOP
ON TELECOMMUNICATIONS "VOYAGE THROUGH CYBERSPACE"
AT SINGAPORE POLYTECHNIC
ON TUESDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 1995 AT 9.30 AM**

It is a pleasure to be here this morning to officially open the workshop on telecommunications, "Voyage Thru' Cyberspace". Internet and the Information Superhighway are taking the world by storm. Recently, when the company which designed Netscape, the software package which facilitates easy navigation of the World Wide Web, was listed on the New York Stock Exchange, the stock more than doubled in its first day of trading inspite of the fact that the company did not have any earnings record. Such is the confidence in the future of Internet.

2   The title "Voyage Thru' Cyberspace" is extremely apt. Surfing the Net is like going on a journey. In an instant, from the comfort of our own chair, we are able travel across time and space , all with the click of a mouse.

3   In May this year, when I was attending an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Minister's Conference on Telecommunications in Seoul, Korea, a US official introduced me to this town in America called Blacksburg in the State of Virginia. He told me that Blacksburg, population 35,000, had initiated an interesting experiment to link up the whole town via Internet. In this so-called Blacksburg Electronic Village, people were chatting with one another, ordering flowers from their local florist, and generally finding out what was going on in their town, via the Net. I wanted to visit Blacksburg when I was in Washington later in June, but was told that it would take me about five hours by road (there was no airport nearby). I abandoned the idea. But when I returned to Singapore, I "visited" Blacksburg on the Internet. It took me a few clicks on the mouse. I was able to find out the history and geography of Blacksburg, how to get around by local public transport, what the main hotel in Blacksburg cost, even book a room, and find out what was going on in the local schools.

4   The impact of such technology will have a significant impact on our society. National boundaries can be crossed in an instant, without visas or passports. Ideas and concepts can be disseminated throughout the world within seconds. There will be content which we will find enriching, as well as material which we will find unacceptable. Debate has been raging around the world as to how countries can exercise control over offensive material on the Internet. Proposals range from control by legislation to controls using special software to self-policing and self-regulation. No one has advocated that we block-off or limit access to Internet.

5   The issues facing us in Singapore are exactly the same. More than any other country, we cannot shut ourselves off from the outside world. Our economy is wide open. We depend on trade with the world. Singaporeans must embrace new technology like the Internet. We must understand and capitalise on the opportunities it presents, while being aware of the threats which it poses, without being overly distracted by them.

The Internet - A Commercial Reality

6   The Internet is no longer just a vehicle for academics and Information Technology (IT) hobbyists to share ideas and discuss issues. With more than 45 million people around the world currently linked to the network, and this number growing by tens of thousands every day, the Internet has become a powerful commercial tool.

7   As major corporations the world over "race" to establish themselves on the Internet, and with major credit card companies and IT security firms working together to make the Net a safe place to do business, secure commercial transactions on the Net are not far off.

8   When this comes about, the Internet will not only become a shopping centre but also a "virtual" warehouse for electronic products. The effect on some industries will be profound. Consider the implications for the printing and distribution industries, when video and printed material can be distributed electronically, instantaneously, on demand. Equipment has become so "intelligent" that a computer is able to order and download a specific book, and then relay this message to an intelligent printer, which then prints out the book.

9   This is not the technology of the future. This is the technology of today. Understanding and applying this technology is the key to our future prosperity.

The Government's Approach to IT

10   The Government has long recognised the vital and strategic role of information technology in contributing to the success of Singapore and its future as a regional business and financial centre. IT can also play a major role in improving services to the public, ultimately contributing to a better quality of life for all Singaporeans.

11   Singapore's future competitive advantage lies in being computer literate. In the Information Age, it is information and ideas that is the capital, the resource of the future. Unlike oil or gas, we can generate new ideas and new information. Singapore should aim to be a nett exporter of information and ideas.

12   To do this, we must first upgrade and expand our IT infrastructure. In 1991, the Government launched "IT2000", the national plan to link up all of Singapore with a digital network, effectively creating an "intelligent" island. We are on track to realising this vision. Next, we must get hardware and software into our offices, our schools and our homes. The civil service alone has spent $655 million on computer equipment and software in its civil service computerisation program. Latest National Computer Board (NCB) survey shows that 90 per cent of offices with 10 or more employees have personal computers (PCs), and 30 per cent of homes have PCs. Thirdly, we must change our work habits and our mindset. We must embrace technology like the Internet and learn how to use it to enrich our work and our lives. Computers should not be fancy typewriters or video game machines. It should be for learning, for networking, and for sharing and generating information.

13   Latest Housing and Development Board (HDB) survey shows that 20 per cent of HDB households own PCs. Imagine these households linked together via the Internet, communicating with each other via E-mail, ordering books from their neighbourhood library or booking badminton courts in their Community Centre via computer link-ups, or exchanging ideas and experiences with someone from Blacksburg, Virgina. All this and more is possible on the Internet.

14   I have tested the idea on a few of my grassroots leaders in my constituency and they are quite excited. They have started work on a project to put Tampines on the WWW of the Internet. I envisage the Tampines Internet project eventually having four core services. For a start, the Tampines Home Page will serve as the focal point for storing and disseminating information on Tampines. Local institutions such as the Tampines Regional Library, the Polyclinic, the Town Council, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Branch Office and the Community Centres will be encouraged to post information on the Home page. Residents can look upon this Home Page as their town newsletter. Secondly, the project will strive to create a community forum where residents, grassroots leaders and their Members of Parliament (MPs) can exchange views via email. Thirdly, I hope the Tampines Internet node will be able to handle transactions between the residents and the local organisations such as the Town Council, the Library, the Ccs and even some shops and other commercial establishments. Residents can then transact with these organisations in the comfort of their own homes. Finally, this project will lead residents onto the Internet so that they can cruise this information superhighway and explore the world at their leisure. Over time, we will create a virtual kampong that will strengthen the bonds among residents of our physical community and rekindle the strong kampong spirit of yesteryears.

TAS' Objective for Licensing a Third Internet Access Provider

15   As part of the plan towards the IT2000 Vision and to make Internet more accessible to Singaporeans, the Government has decided to license a third Public Internet Access Provider.

16   This will lead to increased competition which in turn will benefit both consumers and the IT industry. Consumers will benefit through more innovative, value-added services and competitive pricing. The IT industry will benefit through increased consumer demand and awareness. Liberalisation of Internet public access provision will also raise the potential for development of a software industry in Singapore to develop local content and applications.

17   In selecting the third licensee, the Telecommunication Authority of Singapore (TAS) took the following factors into consideration:

> The proposed range of innovative and value-added network services, such as local databases and applications on the Internet.

> Price competitiveness, taking into account the respective needs of serious users and hobbyists.

> The proposed quality of service standards, such as service reliability, network availability and customer services, and

> The potential to promote the widespread use of Internet in Singapore.

18   The financial bid was taken into consideration, but it was not the determining factor. The overriding policy objective was to ensure that maximum benefits are passed on to the consumers and businesses in Singapore.

19   It is my pleasure to announce this morning that the successful tenderer for the third Internet Access Provider's licence is Cyberway Pte Ltd, which is a consortium made up of SPH Multimedia and ST Telecommunications. May I offer Cyberway my congratulations and wish them every success in their new endeavour.

20   With the Internet access service becoming more easily available to consumers, TAS has also developed a set of Quality of Service standards, to protect the rights of consumers. The standards will focus on concerns such as network availability, service accessibility and service activation time.

21   This is the first set of Quality of Service standards for Internet. TAS will constantly review these standards to ensure that they are relevant and appropriate for future needs.

Resale of Internet Access Service

22   To promote the use of the Internet in Singapore, I would also like to announce that with effect from today, TAS will direct Internet Access Providers to allow resale of their Internet services.

23   Currently, subscribers to an Internet Access Provider are bound by their service agreement not to sell or share the use of their Internet account with anyone else. This restriction unduly impedes the innovative use of Internet services in Singapore.

24   From now on, resellers such as hotels, businesses, and so-called "Cyber-cafes" can provide computer equipment at their premises to enable their customers to access the Internet. The resellers will be required to charge users the same time-based charges as the Internet Access Provider, but they will be allowed to charge fees for the hire of equipment and any value-added services which they provide.

25   Such a move will provide more people with the opportunity to "plug-in" to the information superhighway, without actually having to buy a computer and modem. It will also be a useful way for people to view what services are available, before they decide to subscribe directly to Internet.

26   I am sure we will see some very exciting developments on the Internet scene in Singapore in the months to come. Singaporeans can expect more customer-friendly service packages, competitive pricing, comprehensive customer support, and faster activation time. We should also be able to see a proliferation of local businesses siting their content and applications here in Singapore.

Conclusion

27   Those of you who are attending the workshop will have a fascinating three days ahead of you. There can be no doubt that Internet is here to stay.In awarding the licence for the third public Internet access provider today, I have great hopes for the extensive use of the Internet throughout Singapore, and the establishment of our own software and content industry.

28   It is an exciting journey that we are embarking on. May I wish you all many fruitful hours on your "Voyage through Cyberspace".

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